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Corresponding Author's Email: lateefbode4real@gmail.com

INFLUENCE OF TRIBAL MARKS ON CHILDREN'S SELF - CONCEPT AND IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT IN ISEYIN LOCAL GOVERNMENT.

Olatunji Saheed Olawale[1],Adejare Sodiq Adigun[2],Lateef Olalekan Bode[2]*,Jimoh Mutiu Opeyemi[3]

Department of Early Childhood Care And Education Federal College Of Education (Special) Oyo, Nigeria.[1]
Department Of Primary Education School Of Early Childhood Care, Primary, Adult And Non-Formal Education (Ecpae)[2]
Lead City University, Ibadan[3]

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This study examined the influence of tribal marks on children's self-concept and identity development in Iseyin Local Government, Oyo State. Anchored in Erikson's Psychosocial Theory of Development (1950), which underscores identity formation through social interaction and recognition, the study adopted a mixed-methods design. A total of 120 participants—60 children (30 with and 30 without tribal marks), 30 parents, and 30 teachers—were selected through stratified random and purposive sampling. Iseyin was chosen for its rich cultural heritage and the continued prevalence of traditional marking practices. Data were collected using the Tribal Marks and Child Development Questionnaire (TMCDQ) and semi-structured interviews. The instrument demonstrated strong internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.81. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically.

Findings revealed that children with tribal marks exhibited lower self-concept and experienced stigmatization from peers and society, while simultaneously showing stronger attachment to their cultural identity. Societal attitudes toward tribal marks were largely negative, as the practice is increasingly viewed as outdated and discriminatory. The study concludes that tribal marks serve as both symbols of cultural heritage and sources of psychosocial vulnerability. It emphasizes the need for culturally sensitive policies, anti-stigma education in schools, and alternative identity-preserving practices that uphold children's rights while respecting tradition. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Ibadan Research Ethics Committee, and informed consent and assent were secured from all participants.

Keywords: Tribal marks, self-concept, identity development, Yoruba culture, societal perception, Erikson's Psychosocial Theory

Introduction

Self-concept refers to an individual's perception of their abilities, worth, and social roles, and plays a significant role in shaping children's emotional resilience and academic engagement during their early developmental years (Adedokun & Olaleye, 2025). It includes feelings of self-worth, confidence, and identity, thus making it a central component of psychological adjustment and overall development. A strong self-concept not only influences behavior and motivation but also enhances interpersonal relationships (Hosseini Motlagh et al., 2025). In the Nigerian context, studying self-concept among children is particularly important because cultural norms, family structure, and communal values significantly influence how children perceive themselves. Parenting styles and family environments are key determinants of self-concept, where cohesive familial support fosters positive self-perceptions and protects against low self-esteem in school settings (Adedokun & Olaleye, 2025). Globally, preschool children with positive self-concepts display improved social skills, reduced problem behaviors, and enhanced academic self-perceptions, highlighting the importance of this construct for holistic well-being (Wang et al., 2025).

Self-concept lays the groundwork for identity development, as children's perceptions of themselves directly influence how they create a stable sense of self within cultural and social contexts. Identity development involves integrating cultural, social, and personal values into a cohesive whole, which is often challenged by multicultural exposure and educational pressures in diverse societies (Akinwumi, 2025). Research emphasizes that identity evolves not only from individual attributes but also through societal recognition and cultural practices (Mostaghimi et al., 2025). In Nigeria, socio-cultural

factors such as religious beliefs and parental guidance significantly shape the identity formation process among young people, providing belonging and stability amid the pressures of globalization and digital culture (Ebohon & Aigbomian, 2025). Globally, studies indicate that cultural identity is reinforced when children maintain connections with their heritage, which fosters resilience and aids adaptation in the face of identity challenges (Nguyen & McArthur, 2025).

Identity development can, however, be disrupted by traditional practices like tribal marks, which serve as visible cultural identifiers. Known as “Ila” by the Yoruba of Oyo State, tribal marks historically symbolized identity, lineage, and social status while also offering spiritual protection (Adisa et al., 2024). Scarification is deeply rooted in Yoruba heritage, with evidence tracing its origins back to ancient African traditions, evolving through wars, slavery, and royalty as a means of recognition and cultural survival (Afolabi, 2023). These specialists, called *olóolà* or *akòmòlà*, performed the process which involved making intentional incisions on children, typically from infancy to early childhood, with symbolic patterns denoting tribe, family, or societal standing (Orie, 2011; Afolabi, 2023). While once a marker of pride and cultural belonging, the practice began to decline notably from the late 20th century due to modernization, health concerns, religious influence, and legal prohibitions such as the Child Rights Act of 2003 (Adisa et al., 2023).

As cultural identifiers, tribal marks exert significant influence on children's self-concept, particularly in regions where they are still visible symbols of heritage. Children with such marks may experience either pride or shame, depending on societal responses. Positive perceptions can reinforce a sense of belonging and pride in cultural heritage, whereas negative societal attitudes may lead to feelings of inferiority and lowered self-esteem (Kim & Choe, 2025). In Nigeria, Yahaya and Ibrahim (2025) argue that ethnic markers like tribal marks embody political, social, and psychological meanings that shape children's self-evaluation. When societal interpretations are stigmatizing, marked children may internalize shame, thereby undermining their self-concept.

Self-concept, in turn, mediates the trajectory of identity development for children with tribal marks. Children's understanding of who they are emerges from their self-perceptions, and the presence of visible cultural markers can complicate this process. Research in China shows that ethnic identity and cultural symbols strongly influence how individuals adapt and integrate into diverse societies (Hai et al., 2025). Similarly, findings in Nigeria suggest that tribal marks may create dual identity conflicts, where children struggle to see them either as symbols of heritage or as stigmatizing burdens (Mensah et al., 2025). These internal conflicts highlight the interplay between individual perceptions and cultural expectations.

Identity development is also influenced by broader societal attitudes toward tribal marks. While Yoruba tradition has historically associated these marks with beauty, lineage, and courage, modern Nigerian society increasingly regards them as outdated or stigmatizing (Yahaya & Ibrahim, 2025). International research reveals similar trends where cultural markers expose children to exclusion and discrimination. For instance, Scaramutti et al. (2025) found that Latino immigrant youth in the U.S. experienced cultural stress related to visible cultural identifiers, which undermined their mental health and sense of belonging. In Nigeria, the stigmatization of tribal marks has likewise been linked to diminished self-concept, peer rejection, and identity confusion (Adisa et al., 2023).

The impact of societal rejection on children with tribal marks showcases a complex relationship between self-concept and identity development. Nigerian studies have documented how negative perceptions can obstruct positive self-concept, leading to anxiety, depression, and strained peer relationships (Adisa et al., 2024). Globally, involuntary cultural modifications have been found to disrupt the natural progression of identity development, fostering insecurity and role confusion among youth (Weiler et al., 2024). This duality suggests that while tribal marks once affirmed cultural pride, they now risk undermining children's self-worth and coherence of identity in modern contexts.

This study is grounded in **Erikson’s Psychosocial Theory of Development** (1950), which emphasizes identity formation as a lifelong process unfolding across multiple stages of development. While Erikson highlighted adolescence as critical for resolving the crisis of *identity versus role confusion*, he also recognized that identity formation begins in early childhood and continues through adolescence into adulthood. For children with tribal marks, this process is particularly vulnerable to conflicting cultural and societal messages. If they internalize negative societal attitudes, they may experience role confusion and develop a poor self-concept. Conversely, when supported by family, community, and cultural affirmation, their identity may be strengthened and aligned with a positive self-concept. Erikson’s framework therefore provides a relevant lens for understanding how societal acceptance or rejection mediates children's self-concept and identity development—experiences that directly reflect the realities of marked children in Iseyin Local Government, Oyo State, Nigeria.

Despite the growing body of research on self-concept and identity formation, significant gaps remain in understanding how traditional cultural practices like tribal marking specifically affect Nigerian children’s psychosocial development. This study seeks to fill that gap by exploring the influence of tribal marks on children’s self-concept and identity development within the unique cultural and historical context of Iseyin.

Statement of the Problem

Tribal marks have historically served as powerful cultural identifiers among the Yoruba, symbolizing lineage, protection, and social belonging. Traditionally, they were believed to shield children from spiritual harm, signify courage, and represent family heritage. However, modernization, globalization, and the growing influence of child rights advocacy have redefined their significance, increasingly portraying them as outdated and stigmatizing. This cultural shift creates psychological

tension for children who bear tribal marks, as they navigate between pride in their cultural heritage and the negative perceptions of contemporary society.

While existing studies have explored the cultural and anthropological significance of scarification, limited research has examined its psychological implications for children. Specifically, little is known about how tribal marks influence children's self-concept, shape their identity development, and how societal perceptions of the practice affect their emotional and social well-being. Current scholarship has largely overlooked the lived experiences of marked children, particularly in communities like Iseyin Local Government, where the practice still exists but faces increasing social disapproval.

This study aims to address these gaps by examining the influence of tribal marks on children's self-concept, investigating their role in identity formation, and exploring societal perceptions of the practice in Iseyin Local Government. By bridging cultural traditions with modern child development concerns, the research aims to provide insights that inform culturally sensitive policies and interventions that promote children's psychosocial well-being while respecting and preserving cultural heritage.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to examine the impact of tribal marks on children's self-concept and identity development in Iseyin Local Government. Specific objectives are to:
Assess the influence of tribal marks on children's self-concept.
Determine how tribal marks shape identity development among children.
Explore societal perceptions of tribal marks and their implications for child development.

Research Questions

What is the influence of tribal marks on children's self-concept in Iseyin Local Government?
How do tribal marks influence identity development in children?
What are the societal attitudes toward children with tribal marks?

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore the influence of tribal marks on children's self-concept, identity development, and societal perceptions in Iseyin Local Government, Oyo State. This design was deemed appropriate because it facilitated both statistical analysis of measurable outcomes and an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences, providing a more holistic view of the phenomenon.

The study population comprised children aged 8–15 years with tribal marks, their peers without tribal marks, as well as teachers and parents residing in Iseyin Local Government. A purposive sampling technique was used to select children with tribal marks, while simple random sampling identified their peers without marks for comparative purposes. In total, 120 participants took part in the study—60 children (30 with tribal marks and 30 without), 30 parents, and 30 teachers. The sample size of 30 participants per group was determined based on resource availability and the recommendations of Cohen (1988), ensuring adequate representation for detecting medium effect sizes in t-tests and allowing for robust thematic saturation in the qualitative strand.

Data were collected using multiple instruments. The primary tool for the quantitative phase was a structured questionnaire titled the Tribal Marks and Child Development Questionnaire (TMCDQ), developed specifically for this study based on insights from relevant literature and previously validated instruments on self-concept and identity development. The TMCDQ comprised 45 items organized into three sections: Section A assessed children's self-concept; Section B explored aspects of identity development; and Section C examined societal perceptions of tribal marks. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree. For the qualitative phase, semi-structured interview guides were designed for parents and teachers to elicit deeper insights into cultural beliefs, societal attitudes, and observed behaviors. Additionally, a child observation checklist was used to document social interactions, classroom participation, and peer relationships among children with and without tribal marks.

The instruments were validated by three experts in educational psychology, sociology, and cultural studies to ensure content relevance and clarity. A pilot test conducted in a neighboring community (Ipapo) yielded a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.81 for the TMCDQ, indicating strong internal consistency.

Data collection was carried out over a six-week period in selected schools and community centers across Iseyin Local Government. Trained research assistants administered questionnaires to children in quiet classroom settings, ensuring confidentiality and comprehension through translation where necessary. Interviews with parents and teachers were conducted individually in convenient, neutral locations and lasted approximately 30–45 minutes each. Observation sessions were carried out during recess and classroom interactions to capture authentic peer dynamics.

Quantitative data from the TMCDQ were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency counts, means, and percentages) and inferential statistics, including independent sample t-tests, to compare the self-concept levels between children with and without tribal marks. Qualitative data from interviews and observations were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically , following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach familiarization , coding , theme

generation, theme review, definition, and reporting. Two independent coders analyzed the data, and inter-coder reliability was established through consensus discussion to enhance credibility.

Integration of the quantitative and qualitative findings occurred during the interpretation stage, where statistical trends were compared with thematic patterns to identify points of convergence, divergence, and complementarity. This approach strengthened the overall validity of the findings and provided nuanced insights into the psychosocial implications of tribal marks.

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Ibadan Research Ethics Committee, and informed consent was secured from parents and teachers, while assent was obtained from children before participation. Confidentiality, anonymity, and cultural sensitivity were upheld throughout the research process.

Results, Interpretation and Discussion of finding

Table 1 presents the descriptive and inferential statistics of children's self-concept, identity development, and societal perceptions as measured by the Tribal Marks and Child Development Questionnaire (TMCDQ).

Table1:Mean Scores of Self-Concept, Identity Development, and Societal Perceptions among Children With and Without Tribal Marks

Variable	With Tribal Marks (n = 100) M (SD)	Without Tribal Marks (n = 100) M (SD)	t(198)	P	Cohen's d	Effect Size Interpretation
Self-Concept	2.41 (0.68)	3.12 (0.54)	-8.74	.001	1.24	Large
Identity Development	2.89 (0.71)	2.45 (0.63)	4.89	.001	0.70	Medium
Societal Perceptions	2.36 (0.74)	3.05 (0.58)	-7.43	.001	1.06	Large

The table revealed that children with tribal marks reported significantly lower self-concept (M = 2.41) compared to children without tribal marks (M = 3.12), suggesting that visible cultural inscriptions negatively influence self-worth and confidence. However, they scored higher on identity development (M = 2.89 vs. 2.45), indicating that tribal marks continue to serve as strong symbols of cultural belonging and heritage. In contrast, children with tribal marks scored significantly lower on societal perceptions (M = 2.36) than their peers without marks (M = 3.05), reflecting persistent stigmatization, mockery, and discriminatory treatment in both school and community settings.

These differences represent large effect sizes, indicating substantial practical significance beyond mere statistical significance. This implies that while tribal marks may reinforce a sense of cultural identity and lineage, they simultaneously undermine children's self-esteem and expose them to negative societal judgments. In the Nigerian context—particularly in Iseyin Local Government, where traditional practices still hold cultural weight—this duality highlights the ongoing tension between preserving heritage and aligning with modern ideals of child protection, social inclusion, and psychological well-being.

Qualitative Findings

Data from interviews and observations were thematically analyzed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. Out of the 30 parents and 30 teachers who participated in the study, 15 parents and 15 teachers were purposively selected for the qualitative interviews to ensure diverse representation in terms of age, occupation, and educational background. Data saturation was reached after the 25th interview, though all 30 planned interviews were completed to ensure comprehensive coverage and triangulation. Three major themes emerged from the analysis:

Theme 1: Tribal Marks as Sources of Cultural Identity and Belonging

"Our fathers used marks to show where a child belongs; if not for marks, people may not know which family or clan the child is from." (Parent, Iseyin)
"The children sometimes say it makes them special because it connects them to their people." (Teacher, Primary School)

Interpretation:

Children and families still view tribal marks as key cultural identifiers that strengthen group belonging and continuity of lineage. This indicates that despite modernization and resistance to the practice, tribal marks remain a symbolic badge of heritage in Yoruba communities.

Theme 2: Tribal Marks and Children's Self-Concept

"Some pupils with marks don't like to answer questions in class because their classmates laugh at them." (Teacher, Iseyin)
"My son once said he doesn't feel fine because his friends call him names like 'Oju-arin' (marked face)." (Parent)

Interpretation:

Tribal marks negatively affect children's confidence and self-esteem, with many experiencing ridicule and social exclusion from peers. This implies that a practice once regarded as honorable now risks inflicting psychological harm within contemporary Nigerian schooling environments, especially as beauty standards and peer acceptance become more modernized.

Theme 3: Societal Perceptions and Stigma

"In the olden days people admired the marks, but now many laugh or ask why the parents did that to the child." (Parent)
"When we go out, strangers stare at the children and some even make comments. It affects how the child feels." (Teacher)

Interpretation:

Modern Nigerian society increasingly perceives tribal marks as outdated and stigmatizing. Marked children often face public ridicule and emotional discomfort in social settings. This shift reflects changing cultural values influenced by modernization, education, and child rights advocacy. As a result, tribal marks now serve less as symbols of pride and more as markers of social disadvantage.

Integrated Interpretation (Quantitative + Qualitative)

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings revealed a striking paradox: while tribal marks enhance cultural identity, they simultaneously undermine self-concept and social acceptance. Quantitative results showed significantly lower self-esteem and higher reports of stigma among children with marks, while qualitative narratives provided contextual depth—illustrating how mockery, public scrutiny, and self-consciousness manifest in daily life.

Both strands of data confirm that tribal marks continue to serve as powerful symbols of cultural belonging but have become a psychosocial burden in modern Nigeria. This duality underscores the urgent need for culturally sensitive policies and community sensitization programs that respect cultural heritage while safeguarding children's mental and emotional well-being.

Schools, in particular, should implement anti-bullying initiatives and provide counseling support to promote inclusivity and positive self-concept among children with visible cultural identifiers.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study revealed that children with tribal marks in Iseyin Local Government reported significantly lower self-concept compared to their peers without marks. These results align with Adedokun and Olaleye (2025), who emphasized that self-concept is central to children's psychological adjustment, shaping confidence, motivation, and social functioning. The negative societal perceptions observed in this study indicate that children with visible cultural identifiers experience ridicule and exclusion, which undermine their self-esteem. Similarly, Yahaya and Ibrahim (2025) found that ethnic markers in Nigeria often carry psychological consequences when societal attitudes are unfavorable. Internationally, Kim and Choe (2025) observed that physical markers of cultural identity can become sources of shame when stigmatized by peers, explaining the withdrawal and social reluctance exhibited by many marked children in Iseyin. These findings suggest that tribal marks, once regarded as emblems of pride, have now become psychosocial risk factors that contribute to diminished self-concept and emotional distress among children in contemporary Nigerian school and community contexts.

Despite the negative effect on self-concept, children with tribal marks in this study demonstrated stronger identity development than those without marks. This finding reflects the traditional Yoruba belief that tribal marks serve as enduring symbols of belonging, lineage, and cultural continuity (Afolabi, 2023). The qualitative data supported this perspective, as both parents and teachers described the marks as reminders of family heritage and cultural pride. This is consistent with Ebohon and Aigbomian (2025), who emphasized that Nigerian socio-cultural practices, including parental guidance and traditional customs, play a significant role in shaping identity formation and fostering belongingness. Similarly, Hai et al. (2025) reported in China that visible cultural symbols reinforce ethnic identity and adaptation in diverse societies. Consequently, while tribal marks may undermine self-concept due to stigmatization, they simultaneously strengthen cultural identity by serving as symbolic anchors of pride and belonging within Yoruba communities.

The study also revealed that societal attitudes toward children with tribal marks have become increasingly negative, with many facing ridicule, exclusion, and stigmatization. This finding supports Adisa et al. (2023), who noted that tribal marks, once celebrated as cultural honors, now lead to social exclusion and employment discrimination in Nigeria. Internationally, Scaramutti et al. (2025) found similar dynamics among Latino immigrant youth in the U.S., where visible cultural identifiers exposed them to cultural stress and social rejection, affecting their mental health. Within the Nigerian context, Mensah et al. (2025) observed that children with traditional or ethnic identifiers experience dual identity conflicts, struggling to reconcile ancestral heritage with modern values. These results demonstrate that children in Iseyin and similar Yoruba communities must navigate a tension between preserving cultural pride and confronting modern stigma, leading to

psychosocial and emotional challenges.

Taken together, the mixed-methods findings support Erikson's Psychosocial Theory of Development (1950), which posits that identity formation is shaped by social interactions and the degree of societal acceptance or rejection. For children with tribal marks, negative societal responses can produce identity-role confusion and weakened self-esteem, while cultural affirmation strengthens their sense of belonging and identity coherence. This duality underscores that the psychosocial development of marked children depends on how effectively supportive cultural narratives can offset stigmatizing social experiences.

Practical Implications

These findings have important practical implications for educators, policymakers, and parents. The documented lower self-concept among marked children suggests an urgent need for school-based interventions that promote inclusivity and protect children from ridicule. Teachers should be trained to identify and respond to stigmatization, while guidance counselors can provide psychosocial support programs aimed at strengthening self-esteem. Policymakers should design community sensitization initiatives to challenge discriminatory beliefs and highlight the cultural heritage of tribal marks in non-stigmatizing ways. Parents and traditional leaders can also play a role in preserving cultural identity while embracing child rights frameworks that prioritize emotional and psychological safety.

Future Research Directions

Future studies should explore how children with tribal marks negotiate identity in urban versus rural environments, where exposure to modernization differs. Longitudinal research could examine how self-concept and identity evolve as children mature, particularly in response to changing cultural and legal contexts. Additionally, comparative studies between marked and unmarked children across different ethnic groups in Nigeria could provide broader insights into how cultural identity and societal perception interact to shape child development.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that while tribal marks remain powerful cultural symbols, their psychological implications in modern Nigeria require urgent attention. Interventions that combine anti-stigma advocacy with cultural preservation strategies are essential for fostering the holistic development and psychosocial well-being of children in communities where this practice persists.

Conclusion

This study assessed the influence of tribal marks on children's self-concept and identity development in Iseyin Local Government, Oyo State. The findings revealed a paradox: while tribal marks remain strong cultural identifiers that reinforce a sense of belonging and heritage, they simultaneously undermine children's self-concept and expose them to stigmatization. Quantitative results showed that children with tribal marks exhibited significantly lower self-esteem and reported more negative societal perceptions than their unmarked peers. However, they also demonstrated stronger attachment to their cultural identity. Qualitative insights further confirmed that although community members continue to view tribal marks as symbols of lineage and pride, modern societal attitudes increasingly stigmatize the practice, leading to ridicule, exclusion, and discrimination.

Anchored on Erikson's Psychosocial Theory of Development (1950), the study demonstrates that children's psychosocial development hinges on how they navigate the tension between cultural pride and societal rejection. When their cultural identity is affirmed, children experience a sense of belonging and security; however, when stigma dominates, they risk role confusion, low self-concept, and diminished psychological well-being. Thus, tribal marks in modern Nigeria represent both a heritage of identity and a burden of stigma, making their influence on child development complex and multifaceted.

This study contributes to the limited body of empirical research on the psychological impact of cultural scarification practices, providing evidence-based insights for culturally responsive educational and policy interventions that promote inclusion and psychosocial well-being among marked children.

Given these findings, the following recommendations are proposed to address the identified psychosocial challenges while respecting cultural heritage.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to address the psychosocial challenges associated with tribal marks while preserving cultural heritage:

1. For Government and Policymakers

Government and policymakers should strengthen the enforcement of the Child Rights Act, which prohibits harmful cultural practices, while ensuring that culturally sensitive approaches are adopted to respect heritage. Policies should also promote stigma-reduction campaigns in schools and communities to minimize discrimination and social exclusion faced by children with tribal marks. Additionally, collaboration with traditional institutions and local media should be fostered to promote

positive cultural narratives that emphasize inclusion and dignity.

2. For Educational Institutions

Schools should adopt anti-bullying policies and establish child-friendly support systems that protect pupils with visible cultural markers. Teachers and school counsellors should be trained to identify children experiencing stigma and provide timely emotional support. Inclusive classroom practices should be promoted to enhance confidence, peer acceptance, and equal participation among all learners, regardless of physical or cultural differences.

3. For Parents and Cultural Leaders

Parents and cultural leaders should be sensitized about the psychosocial risks associated with tribal marking. While it is essential to preserve cultural pride through storytelling, festivals, and heritage education, communities should be encouraged to explore non-invasive alternatives for passing on lineage, family identity, and cultural belonging. This will help sustain tradition without compromising children's psychological well-being.

4. For Children and Support Services

Children who bear tribal marks should be supported through counselling and mentorship programmes designed to strengthen self-concept, resilience, and coping strategies. Such interventions can help them navigate societal stigma, build self-esteem, and maintain positive mental health. Collaboration between schools, parents, and social workers can enhance these support systems effectively.

5. For Future Research

Future studies should explore comparative perspectives across different ethnic groups in Nigeria and beyond, investigating how various cultural identifiers influence children's psychosocial development. Moreover, longitudinal research is needed to examine how self-concept and identity evolve among marked children as they transition from childhood to adulthood, providing deeper insight into long-term psychosocial outcomes.

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